



at the bran dip. My last present was a glass pen-holder with a coloured picture of Princes Street, Edinburgh, in one end. (You had to put it up to your eye to see it.) The next day at school, someone smashed it. As it turned out, there were no more parties after that one.

It happened like this.

The next Sunday, a new teacher arrived. We saw her standing in the porch, very elegant in white linen, talking to Miss Wilkie and the superintendent. She was twirling a white frilled parasol as she talked, and laughing a low, delightful laugh. She looked about twenty.

The bell went. We filed in, speculating in whispers.

Minnie Fry, a nosy little beast whom nobody liked, claimed to know all about it.

"Her name's Miss Beagle," she hissed, jabbing me in the back with her hymn book. "Her father's a baker. I know. She lives next door to my auntie's. See. She's come to help Miss Wilkie."

We ignored her, but she was right after all. Two minutes later, she was tossing back her ratty hair and smirking at us, as Miss Wilkie repeated the information; or some of it. The new teacher was indeed Miss Beagle, and she was to take half the intermediate class. Our numbers, continued Miss Wilkie, glancing round with a gay smile, were becoming out of hand. She was beginning to feel a little like the old woman who lived in a shoe. (Obliging titters.) And so, she concluded, here was Miss Beagle, ready to help us all out.

MISS BEAGLE smiled at us. Charmingly. And Miss Wilkie proceeded to make a fatal mistake.

One of the boys was sent to fetch another kitchen chair from the cloak-room. This chair was placed at a little distance from Miss Wilkie's, and on it Miss Beagle seated herself, her parasol beside her, and her white-gloved hands folded demurely in her lap. Some obscure vanity, or perhaps an innocent

desire to gauge our loyalty, must have prompted Miss Wilkie's next remarks.

"All those who wish to join the new class may take their seats and go," she announced. "The rest will remain with me."

Then she waited, smiling at us.

Well . . .

There sat our dear Miss Wilkie, polishing her glasses with a plain white handkerchief, and smiling that benign and confident smile. And there, on the other hand, sat Miss Beagle. A beauty. A perfect little darling. We adored her already. She was so deliciously pretty, with eyes blue as hydrangeas, and a necklace of carved beads long enough to skip with. Moreover, she was new, and her appearance thrillingly evocative. She breathed an aura of soft indulgence; trips with her favourites, perhaps to "Ramona," or the Marble Bar; pettings and cossetings; husky laughter and peppermint creams. We longed to give her flowers. . .

Finally, her father was a baker. . . We thought of Miss Beagle's parties; Miss Beagle's father's cakes. . .

MINNIE FRY was the first traitor.

Off she bounced with her chair, and set it bang up against Miss Beagle's. She turned round and gave us a smug, proprietary look, then actually snuggled up and took hold of one of the white-gloved hands. What cheek! Just because her old auntie lived next door. . .

We rose in a body, picked up our seats, and swarmed across the room. It took us a good five minutes to get settled, what with all the jostling and shoving for position, but by that time it began to dawn on us that something was wrong. The class was the same size as ever, only now it was Miss Beagle's.

She hung her parasol on the back of her chair, out of harm's way, and began to peel off her gloves. In dismay, it seemed, she looked across at Miss Wilkie; and in dismay Miss Wilkie looked back. She had been left with two pupils; the Bowie twins. They were gazing up at her now with identical,

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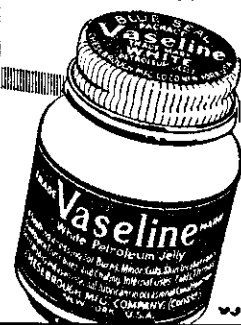
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